



**Ashburnham Village Center Zoning District Study Committee Meeting  
Tuesday, March 25, 2008, 7:00 PM  
Light Department, 24 Williams Road**

**Members Present:** Diane Hill, Joseph Kalagher, John MacMillan, Elizabeth McLaughlin, and David Perry. **Members Absent:** Joseph Daigle, Jonathan Dennehy, Stan Herriott (Chairman), and Jim Whidden. **Staff Present:** Eric R. Smith, AICP, Town Planner (Clerk)

**I. Introduction: Call to Order**

Meeting was called to order at 7:05p.m.

**II. Approval of March 4, 2008 Meeting Minutes**

Committee members reviewed Draft March 4, 2008 Meeting Minutes provided in mailing. Under Section II, Approval of the January 29, 2008 minutes, members in attendance at the March 4<sup>th</sup> meeting recalled the Vote for the 1/29/08 minutes was taken before Jim Whidden arrived. The other clarification was under Section VI, Adjournment, motion had been made by Joe Kalagher. Only four (4) Committee members present tonight were at the March 4<sup>th</sup> meeting, so there was no quorum present to approve the March 4, 2008 Meeting Minutes.

Dave Perry asked status of Stan Herriott being a voting member on the Committee. Committee referenced Chapter IV, Section 1 of the Town's General Bylaws, which states "No person shall be appointed to a committee or board who is not a registered voter of the Town and domiciled in the Town." The matter would be brought forth at the next regular meeting of the Village Center Zoning District Study Committee.

**III. Analyze Existing Conditions**

**A. Existing Conditions in the Building Environment**

The Committee continued discussion from the previous meeting focusing on existing lot sizes and frontage. The Town Planner had mailed out a GIS Map indicating parcels identified as "Potential Village Center Commercial Core Parcels" as well as an updated an Excel spreadsheet document (dated 3/18/2008) listing the parcels in this identified Village Center Commercial Core. This spreadsheet sorted such parcels from smallest to largest. The inventory of these parcels allowed calculation of Average Lot Size (32,862 square feet) and Median Lot Size (14,487 square feet). The Town Planner also calculated that the Average Lot Size without the 11.4-acre Cushing Academy Parcel (Map 62 Parcel 1), which brought the Average Lot Size down to 25,201 square feet and then Average Lot Size without both the 11.4-acre Cushing and 32 Main Street (Town of Ashburnham), which brought average down to 20,819 square feet.

Discussion centered on review of Median Square Footage of Core Lot Sizes, which is approximately 15,000 square feet, using the 15,000 square-feet as possible minimum lot size for

the Village Center Commercial Core area. The Committee compared how many lots are below 15,000 square feet, which would be non-conforming, if 15,000 square feet became the standard. Elizabeth McLaughlin noted that frontage is another consideration to consider for subdivision opportunity. The Town Planner noted that they would be reviewing frontage information shortly.

Committee members, Joe Kalagher, discussed still going with 10,000 square feet as a minimum lot size, based on the 1989 Downtown Planning Study recommendation. Such minimum lot size would bring 44 lots within the identified Village Center Commercial Core into conformity. This figure would be an increase of 13 lots over the 31 lots (less than half of the 64 total lots within the identified Commercial Core area) that would be in conformity of a 15,000 square-foot minimum lot size requirement.

The Town Planner then handed out another updated Excel Spreadsheet that updates the 3/18/2008 Potential Village Center Commercial Core Parcels spreadsheet. This spreadsheet is dated 3/25/2008 and adds calculation of Average and Median frontage. The Town Planner noted that frontage calculations are more challenging than the lot size calculations. This situation is due to corner lots, which give a lot greater total frontage than lots with one street frontage. Therefore, the Town Planner calculated the Average and Median Core frontage in two different ways.

The first was just taking average and median frontage for the total frontage of each of the 64 lots within the identified Potential Village Center Commercial Core. Page 2 of the 3/25/2008 spreadsheet shows that the average "Core" total frontage equals 154.32 and that the Median "Core" total frontage equals 93.00. The second way to calculate an Average and Median frontage was to add all frontage values, which would take into account lots that have more than one frontage. The 3/18/2008 and 3/25/2008 spreadsheets have a column entitled "Frontage Notes" which indicates those lots that have two or more frontage values. Pages 3 and 4 of the 3/25/2008 spreadsheet list such frontage values to determine an Average Frontage with all Frontages for each lot at 120.03 feet. The Median value with all frontages from each lot equals 91 feet.

With this information in hand the Committee discussed determining an appropriate value for a minimum frontage requirement for the Commercial Core Village Center. The Town Planner noted that the information from his frontage calculation analysis suggests that the 50-foot minimum frontage requirement recommended in the 1989 Downtown Planning Study maybe too small. The Committee felt a minimum based on the 91 Median Value was too high, but discussed a value of 75 feet. With 75 feet as a minimum frontage requirement there would still be 19 lots that would be nonconforming (29.69%).

Thus the Committee members present discussed going with a 10,000 square-foot and 75-foot minimum lot size and frontage requirement. The members directed the Town Planner to prepare a GIS Map showing which lots would be remain nonconforming as well as what lots would still be subdividable, based on this proposed standard, including any such corner lots. These standards are just for the "Commercial Core" part of the Village Center. The residential areas surrounding the Village Center, e.g. along Water Street, Lawrence Street, Chapel Street, Main Street (from east of Water Street on the north side and east of Maple Avenue on the south side), as well as Main Street (from north side from Chapel Street to Cushing Street) as well as the "strip" along Main Street between Cushing Street and the Corey Hill Road/Lashua Road intersection are to be assessed separately.

## **B. Review Existing Market Conditions**

The Town Planner provided an update on grant opportunities being sought to get consultant assistance with this effort. As noted at the last meeting, the Town of Ashburnham is still awaiting a decision from the Mass. Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) for consultant assistance under their Downtown Technical Assistance program. Awards were originally to be announced by January 25, 2008. The Town Planner had been continuously getting answers that the decision is going to be made in another week or so. Since the last meeting, John MacMillan contacted Sen. Brewer's Office, who received the same answer from DHCD.

The Town Planner again was hopeful the Town would still get the DHCD grant, but reiterated recent discovery of online resource from the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Extension's Main Street Program, which has an online "Downtown and Business District Market Analysis" Toolkit. The Town Planner noted the Website's extensive tools to develop our own Market Analysis for the Village Center, including creating a Building and Business Inventory Database. Also would allow us to analyze our market opportunities by Sector (retail, restaurant, etc.). Although the resource is very detailed, the website recommends that the process would take 6 months to fully analyze all the Town's Market Conditions and Opportunities.

In addition, the Town Planner updated the Committee about the North Central Mass. Development Corporation (NCMDC) "Seed Grant" opportunity. A two-page proposal was due Friday, March 14<sup>th</sup>. The Town Planner noted after discussions with Nancy Jackson of the NCMDC, he submitted a Seed Grant proposal for a Marketing Plan for the Ashburnham Village Center in time for the March 14<sup>th</sup> deadline.

## **C. Existing Parking in the Village Center, Existing Parking Requirements.**

The Town Planner noted discussion regarding parking came up at the last meeting when it was raised by Jim Whidden. Existing Parking in the Village Center needs to be inventoried, which can be part of the Village Center Site Walk scheduled for Saturday, April 12<sup>th</sup>. Some parking space inventory counts, such as around the Ashburnham Market, Ashburnham Wine & Spirits and Athol Savings Bank, as well as the Ashburnham True Value Hardware Store, can be provided by reviewing approved plans.

The Town Planner handed out Section 5.3 of the Ashburnham Zoning Bylaw, which presents the existing parking requirements. The Town Planner noted he learned at a parking workshop last year that any time there is a requirement of more than 3 parking spaces per 1,000 feet of commercial area leads to a situation of more asphalt than building space on the lot. It was noted that the Planning Board was given flexibility to waive parking space requirements as part of Site Plan Review applications for projects in the Village Center back at the May 2006 ATM.

Diane Hill noted availability of parking near the business and not patronizing a business when you have to walk between businesses, especially given the poor conditions of sidewalks, which makes it dangerous to walk (Diane mentioned both the City of Gardner and the Town of Ashburnham.). It was suggested to review the inclusion of on-street parking as well as on-site parking (also known as off-street parking) in determining parking space requirements. For on-street parking issues need to get the opinions of the Police Department. The Town Planner would contact the Police Chief.

Joe Kalagher noted Public Safety requirements of a specified street width prevented parking on portions of Central Street. Could consider removing sidewalk on one-side to allow more on-street parking. Joe gave an example where in Old Orchard Beach, Maine on some streets they

put in on-street parking, but worked with landowners to move the sidewalk more into the property.

For parking need to think of available (versus required) parking spaces, as well as parking space size requirements (e.g. dimensions of each parking space).

#### **IV. Consensus on Goals/Objectives**

##### **A. List of Village Center Issues with Objectives for Solutions**

The Town Planner reviewed the first issue he had prepared at the suggestion of Joe Daigle to create a list of what is wrong with the Village Center Zoning District with objectives to work with in fixing the problems. The first issue prepared in this format was regarding the goal to “reduce nonconforming lots due to lot size and frontage.” The issue is that the “Village Center Zoning District approved in 2004 implemented many of the 1989 Downtown Planning Study suggestions, but kept 1973 Zoning requirements for lot size and frontage.” The Recommendation is to “change the VC lot size and frontage requirements to bring more lots into conformity, which will assist in being more business-friendly.”

The Committee discussed other issues which a similar matrix format can be created. The other issues are: parking, residential/mixed uses, traffic, market conditions, recreational/other amenities and tax incentives/credits.

Possible recreational amenities were discussed by the Committee. Dave Perry noted a skateboard park in Keene, NH. Elizabeth McLaughlin indicated desire to have outside dining opportunities, including tables with umbrellas.

##### **B. Discuss possible Public Outreach Methods, e.g. Visual Preference Survey**

The idea of a Visual Preference Survey was discussed at the last meeting. In the meeting packet, the Town Planner sent the Committee members the sample on Page 325 of the Small Town Planning Handbook excerpts provided at the first meeting. He noted that he did contact the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) to see what sample they may be available to provide. The Planner he spoke with noted that they have conducted Visual Preference Surveys at a Public Forum setting. They would get 50-60 people in attendance. The Town Planner noted we had about 30 people at the Highway Department Site Redevelopment Charrette. The Committee agreed it would be best to do this Survey in a written survey format.

Although the APA Small Town Handbook suggested using examples in the same Town for the Visual Preference Survey, the MAPC recommended making use of photo examples from communities within the region, but outside of the Town of Ashburnham. The Committee agreed with the idea to use photos outside of Ashburnham. The Committee supported putting a survey form in the monthly Light Bill. But also perhaps have a Web Survey, to be a longer version of the one-page, double-sided survey that could go in the Light Department bill. The Town Planner would work on taking photos of example, such as in the Town of Westminster (their Cumby’s strip plaza, but also the new strip center designed in a more traditional architectural pattern). A relatively new Mixed-Use development in Rutland. Also show a restaurant with outside seating, with Peterborough and/or Keene New Hampshire providing examples.

The Committee also discussed the need to involve Cushing Academy within the Village Center Zoning District study process. The Town Planner would contact Headmaster James Tracy to see about having himself and any of the Cushing Trustees attend a future VCZD Study Committee meeting.

**V. Develop Appropriate Zoning Bylaw Amendments**

**A. Committee Exercise of Identifying Schedule of Uses (By Right, Special Permit or Site Plan Review)**

This matter was tabled until the next meeting, as the time was 8:45p.m. The Town Planner suggested to the Committee that this matter be placed first on the Agenda for the April 16<sup>th</sup> meeting.

**VI. Scheduling of Future Meeting(s) and Village Center Site Visit(s)**

The first Village Center Site Visit is scheduled for Saturday, April 12<sup>th</sup> from 10am to Noon. For those interested, it was scheduled as an option to meet at 9a.m. at the Coffee Shop. Then the formal Site Walk would begin at 10a.m. with the Committee meeting at Town Hall. The Committee's next regular meeting was scheduled for Wednesday, April 16, 2008 at 7:00p.m. at the Municipal Light Department.

**VII. Adjournment**

Motion to adjourn was made by Joe Kalagher. Passed by a vote of 6 to 0. Meeting was adjourned at 8:50p.m.

Meeting minutes submitted by Eric R. Smith, AICP, Town Planner